Russian Opposition Leader Alexei Navalny on His Poisoning

"I Assert that Putin Was Behind the Crime"

For the first time after his poisoning, Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny discusses his near-death experience, Putin's alleged responsibility and Merkel's visit with him in the hospital.

Interview Conducted by **Benjamin Bidder** und **Christian Esch**
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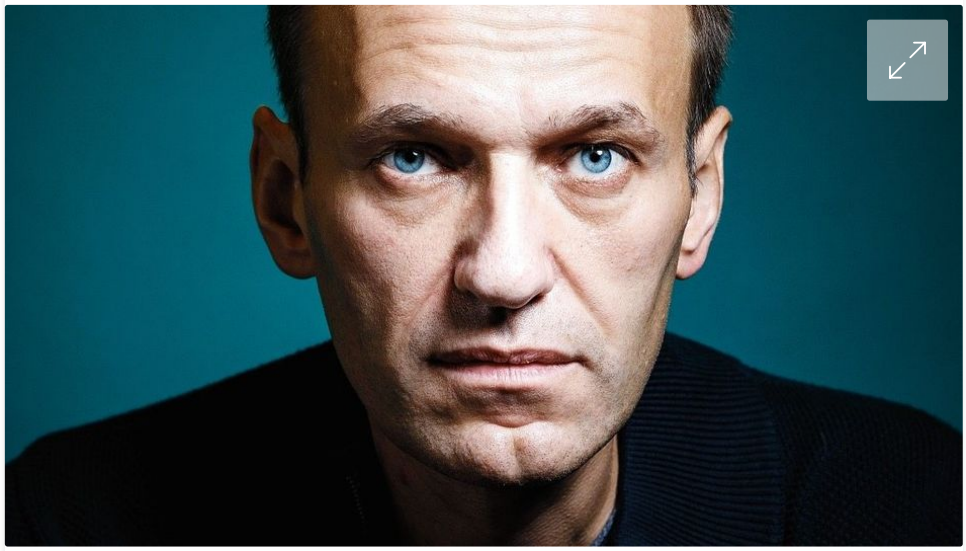

Foto: Peter Rigaud / DER SPIEGEL

It's six o'clock in the morning on Wednesday when Alexei Navalny shows up at the Berlin editorial office of DER SPIEGEL for an interview. The office is located a few hundred meters from Charité University Hospital, where Navalny spent a month receiving treatment, hovering between life and death.

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Navalny, who was poisoned with the nerve agent Novichok, was only released from the hospital last week.

Four agents from the State Office of Criminal Investigation (LKA) accompanied him during his visit. Navalny, who wasn't able to walk not long ago, took the stairs to the office rather than the elevator.

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Alexei Navalny, 44, is Russia's most prominent opposition politician. Following the attempt on his life on August 20 in the Siberian city of Tomsk, however, he is now squarely in the international spotlight. German Chancellor Angela Merkel intervened for him to be allowed to leave Russia for treatment in Germany. Because he was poisoned with a substance that can essentially only come from state-run laboratories in Russia, the question of Russian President Vladimir Putin's personal responsibility is one that many around the world are asking. It's not the first time that a Russian opposition politician was to be killed, but it is the first time that the circumstances seem to so clearly point at the Kremlin.

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Jeden Morgen ordnen die politischen Autoren des SPIEGEL die Themen des Tages für Sie ein.



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The interview with DER SPIEGEL is the first that Navalny has given since the attack. He is alert at the meeting and he remembers many things - and yet the impact of the poisoning is still clear. Scars on his neck show where he was hooked up to a ventilator. When he pours water from the bottle into his glass, it is obvious that it requires effort and he has to use both hands. But he refuses assistance. "My physical therapist says I should try to do everything myself," he says

Navalny seems more nervous than he did at previous meetings. His face is gaunter and his figure more angular after losing 12 kilos. But his voice is the same as it has always been, as is his humor, his irony. Sitting next to him is his spokeswoman, Kira Yarmysh, who was with him on the plane on August 20 when he first began showing signs of having been poisoned.

personality. So, the first thing I want to say is: I feel a tremendous gratitude to all Germans. I know it sounds a bit overblown, but Germany has become a special country for me. I had few connections here before and only visited Berlin for the first time three years ago! And then so much human compassion from so many people.

DER SPIEGEL: Our readers will be happy to hear that. How are you doing Mr. Navalny?

Navalny: Much better than three weeks ago, and it is getting better each day. Not long ago, I could only climb 10 steps, but now I can make it up to the 5th floor. The most important thing for me is that my mental abilities have returned. Well, maybe we will find the opposite to be true during this interview (*laughs*).

DER SPIEGEL: You wrote on Instagram that you are no longer able to stand on one foot.

Navalny: Now I can again. My next challenge is to stand on one leg and stretch the other leg forward, which I practice every day. These are actually exercises that ninety-year-olds do in the park.

DER SPIEGEL: Are you able to sleep well?

Navalny: That's my biggest problem. I used to laugh about people with sleep problems because I never had them myself. But then came the coma, the anesthesia, the weaning off of the sedatives, that long hovering state when I was neither asleep nor awake. I haven't been able to sleep without sleeping pills since.



Navalny was flown from Omsk to Berlin on this chartered plane. Foto: Kira Yarmysh / dpa

DER SPIEGEL: When you lost consciousness, you were a figure in Russian politics. When you woke from the coma, you were a global political figure. Chancellor Merkel even visited you at your bedside. What did you talk about?

Navalny: That was last week. It was totally unexpected. The door opened, my doctor came in - and Merkel. It was a private meeting with my family - my wife Julia and my son Zahar were there. I can't tell you the details, but we didn't discuss anything secret or sensational. The visit was a gesture. I was impressed by how precisely she knows Russia and my case. She knows some of the details better than I do. She really has a deep understanding of what is going on in Russia. And when you talk to her, you understand why she has been at the top in Germany for so long. I thanked her for her efforts and she said: "I only did my duty."

DER SPIEGEL: What has daily life been like for you since you left the hospital? Where are you living?

Navalny: I live with my wife and my son here. My daughter has returned to Stanford University. We've rented an apartment. My everyday life is monotonous. I exercise daily - that's all I do. In the morning, I take a walk in the park - that's my job. Then I do the exercises with the doctor. In the evening, I go for another walk. During the day, I try to work on the computer. The doctors say I can be restored to 90 percent of my former self, maybe even 100 percent, but nobody really knows for sure. Basically, I'm a bit of a guinea pig. After all, there aren't many people you can observe who are still alive after being poisoned with a nerve agent. At some point, I will probably be written about in medical journals. And I am happy to share my experiences. Seriously: The Russian leadership has developed such a penchant for poisoning that it is not going to stop doing so anytime soon. My medical history will be instructive.

Before the interview begins, he has something he wants to say.



This photo was taken in Navalny's hotel room in Tomsk, where his team secured water bottles and other objects. One of the bottles contained traces of the poison. Foto: AFP

Navalny: It is important to me that this interview appears in the German press. I have never been closely associated with Germany. I don't know anyone here. I didn't know a single politician. And yet it turned out - you see, my voice is trembling, I have become so emotional - that German politicians and Angela Merkel have taken an interest in my fate and saved my life. The doctors at Charité saved my life a second time and, more importantly, they gave me back my

DER SPIEGEL: Going by your posts on social media, it appears that you left your bed in the hospital often.

Navalny: The doctors and nurses at Charité are the most tolerant people in the world. I was a difficult patient. I would get up at night in the intensive care unit, and one time I tore all the tubes out of my body and started bleeding. Later, when I was already conscious and could recognize and talk to the people around me, I had hysterical fits. I said I was healthy and wanted to go to a hotel. Weeks later, I understood that this strange behavior was a consequence of the poisoning.



A first sign of life: Navalny with his children Daria and Zahar and his wife Yulia in his room at Berlin's Charité University Hospital Foto: Alexei Navalny / ddp media

DER SPIEGEL: Let's go over what happened to you, and we'll start with your last memory before you lost consciousness. It's August 20, at eight o'clock in the morning. You're sitting in a plane from Tomsk to Moscow. You had spent a few days in Siberia. What was going through your head?

Navalny: It was a wonderful day. I'm on my way home, with a strenuous and successful business trip behind me. We shot videos for the regional election campaign, and everything had gone according to plan. I'm sitting comfortably in my seat and I'm looking forward to a quiet flight during which I can watch a series. Once I get back to Moscow, I am looking forward to recording my weekly YouTube show and then spending the weekend with my family. I feel good, as I did at the airport.

And then... it's hard to describe because there is nothing to compare it with. Organophosphorus compounds attack your nervous system like a DDos attack attacks the computer - it's an overload that breaks you. You can no longer concentrate. I can feel that something is wrong. I break out in a cold sweat. I ask Kira beside me for a tissue. Then I say to her: Speak to me. I need to hear a voice - something's wrong with me. She looks at me like I'm crazy and starts talking.

DER SPIEGEL: What happened then?

Navalny: I don't understand what is happening to me. The stewards come by with the trolley. I first want to ask them for water, but I then say: No, let me by, I'm going to the bathroom. I wash myself with cold water, sit down and wait and then wash myself again. And then I think: If I don't get out now, I'll never get out. The most important feeling was: You are feeling no pain, but you know you're dying. And I mean, right now, yet nothing hurts. I leave the toilet, turn to the steward - and instead of asking for help, I say, to my own surprise: "I've been poisoned. I'm dying." And then I lay down on the ground in front of him to die. He's the last thing I see - a face that looks at me with slight astonishment and a light smile. He says: "Poisoned?" and by that he probably means I was served bad chicken.

And the last thing I hear, already on the floor is: Do you have heart problems? But my heart doesn't hurt. Nothing hurts. All I know is that I am dying. Then I hear voices growing ever quieter, and a woman calling: "Don't leave us! Don't leave us!" Then it's over. I know I'm dead. Only later would it turn out that I was wrong.

DER SPIEGEL: There's a video shot by a passenger in which your screams can be heard on the plane. It sounds horrible, almost like the cries of an animal.

Navalny: I've watched it - it's circulating on the internet under the title: "Navalny screaming in pain." But it wasn't pain. It was something else, worse. Pain makes you feel like you're alive. But in this case, you sense: This is the end.



Navalny posted photos of himself on Instagram showing him on the balcony of his room. Foto: Navalny / Instagram / dpa

DER SPIEGEL: How long did the whole thing last?

Navalny: Perhaps 30 minutes passed from the point where I thought something was off to unconsciousness. That was all after we took off.

DER SPIEGEL: You had spent the night at the Hotel Xander in Tomsk, which is where you likely came into contact with the poison. Do you remember what you touched there?

Navalny: Traces of the poison were found on a water bottle. Apparently I touched a contaminated surface, then reached for the water bottle, drank something from it, put it back and then left the hotel room. So I assume that I absorbed the poison through my skin. There are many objects that you touch in a hotel before you leave - the shower, the toilet, the clothes rack, the handle of your bag - you are sure to touch something. That's why it is so important to examine my clothes. The poison can be applied to any item of personal clothing.

DER SPIEGEL: The clothes were taken after you were admitted to the hospital in Omsk and they were never returned.

Navalny: I have no doubt that my clothes have been simmering in a large tank of bleach for a month! So that the traces are removed (*laughs*). If it hadn't been for this chain of fortunate circumstances - the pilots making an emergency landing in Omsk, with the ambulance already waiting at the Omsk airport, and the fact that I was given atropine within an hour and a half - I would have died. The plan was smart: I would have taken off, died in flight and wound up in a morgue in Omsk or Moscow. And then nobody would have found Novichok, because morgues don't have mass spectrometers. Besides, they could have waited a bit before performing the analysis. I would have just been a suspicious death.



He also posted an image of himself as he practiced walking up and down stairs.
Foto: AFP

DER SPIEGEL: You could have died in the hotel.

Navalny: Some people suspect that the plan was to have me die in my sleep. Honestly, though, after going through the poisoning, I think I would have woken up. It would have been an amusing sight for the hotel security cameras: Me crawling across the hallway in my underwear with these symptoms. I guarantee that with these symptoms, I would have used the last of my strength to crawl out. Having me die in that hotel would have been a risky plan. The staff still could have called the ambulance.

DER SPIEGEL: What is your explanation for the fact that nobody else was harmed by the poison? Others were injured in Salisbury, in Britain, where former agent Sergei Skripal was poisoned.

Navalny: I think they learned their lessons from the Skripal case when 48 people were contaminated and one woman died. That's why you can't apply the poison to an object such as the sink or the shower, which I might not even use. Or to my mobile phone, which I might have given Kira - in which case, instead of one suspicious death, you would have had two. Like I said: I'm just speculating here. Obviously we're looking at a more sophisticated means, and it was applied to an object that only I touch.

DER SPIEGEL: What about the traces you left on the water bottle?

Navalny: They were harmless. It was a minimal amount of poison. Anyone could have touched it without suffering any harm.



Navalny has announced his intention to return to Moscow: "I have no desire for this emigrant nonsense." Foto: Peter Rigaud / DER SPIEGEL

DER SPIEGEL: The fact that the water bottle could be examined at all in Germany is thanks to members of your staff, who removed it from the hotel room along with other objects.

Navalny: They were still sitting in the same hotel at breakfast when they received a text message from Kira in Omsk that I had been poisoned. The scenario of me getting killed was, of course, always present, although more as a joke. But their first thought was that they needed to get to my room to secure what they could. It was more out of desperation, because everyone thought I had been poisoned by tea at the airport. No one was thinking about a nerve agent. I could hardly believe it myself. It's like dropping a nuclear bomb on a single person. There are a million more effective methods. When my wife Yulia and our staff member Maria Pevchikh brought the items to Germany, they weren't thinking about evidence, but simply about learning what I had been poisoned with. They handed the things over to the doctors, not some secret agents in dark sunglasses with ear pieces.

DER SPIEGEL: You were apparently already being followed at every turn in Tomsk, at least according to a leak from Russian security forces to a Moscow newspaper. Did you know?

Navalny: I have been followed nonstop since 2012 - often very openly. When I travel to the regions, there is usually a whole horde - agents from the Center for Combating Extremism, the FSB domestic intelligence agency, and so on. But we didn't notice anything beyond the usual. I heard about the article. It seems to me that elements of the secret services, which were responsible for surveillance, were seeking to

publicly absolve themselves - saying we are not to blame for the poisoning! Surely, no order was issued to the entire FSB to kill Navalny. It was limited to the highest level. And those who were responsible for tailing me were themselves surprised by the act.

DER SPIEGEL: Have the German authorities told you more than they have shared with the public?

Navalny: No. What I know, I have gotten from the German media. What we know for sure is that I already had contact with the poison in the hotel. That it was Novichok - or, to be more precise, a new version of it. And that this poison is only available to a small circle of people.



Alexei Navalny was one of the co-organizers in 2011 of the "Russian March" in Moscow, an annual rally of right-wing nationalists. He would later end his participation in the marches. But for years there has been persistent criticism of his open alliance with the nationalists at that time. Foto: Yuri Kozyrev / NOOR / DER SPIEGEL

DER SPIEGEL: You have many enemies. Who do you think is behind your poisoning?

Navalny: I assert that Putin was behind the crime, and I have no other explanation for what happened. I'm not saying this out of self-flattery, but based on the facts. The most important fact is Novichok. The order to use or produce it can only come from two men - the head of the FSB or the head of SWR, the foreign intelligence service.

DER SPIEGEL: What about the military intelligence agency GRU, which has been linked to the attack on Sergei Skripal?

Navalny: Probably also the GRU. When Putin claims that I myself produced Novichok and poisoned myself with it, it's an impossibility. We can assume that only three people can give the order to initiate "active measures" and deploy Novichok. If you're familiar with the Russian reality, then you also know that FSB head Alexander Bortnikov, SVR head Naryshkin or the head of the GRU cannot make a decision like that without being instructed by Putin. They report to him.

DER SPIEGEL: But if Putin is behind it, why did he let you out of the country?

Navalny: I think they were determined not to let me leave the country, so they declared publicly that I was not fit to be transported. They were waiting for me to die. But thanks to the support for me and thanks to the efforts of my wife, the whole thing threatened to turn into a kind of online reality show called: "Navalny Dies in Omsk." And an enormous amount of people, to whom I am very grateful, said: We don't want to watch that show. It's important to Putin’s people that they don’t give their opponent martyr status, that they don't give him - whether dead or alive - any political capital. If I had died in Omsk or suffered permanent harm there, it clearly would have been their responsibility. It might not have been possible to prove the use of Novichok in that case, but it clearly would have been their fault that I was not allowed to leave the country. Besides, they did wait 48 hours, likely hoping that the poison could no longer be proven after that.



Navalny and other opposition leaders are seen in this photo during a protest against Putin's return to the Kremlin in 2012. Foto: Yuri Kozyrev / NOOR / laif

DER SPIEGEL: Putin is known for dividing his opponents into two categories: "enemies" and "traitors." All means are permitted against traitors, a group to which ex-agent Skripal belonged. You, though, are in the "enemies" category. So, why did they use Novichok?

Navalny: If someone had told me a month and a half ago that I would be poisoned with Novichok, I would have laughed at them. After all, we know how Putin fights the opposition. We have 20 years of experience. You can be arrested, beaten up, sprayed with disinfectants or shot on a bridge like Boris Nemtsov. But chemical warfare agents were considered the domain of the intelligence services.

DER SPIEGEL: Did Putin upgrade your status from enemy to traitor? Or do we have the wrong image of Putin's system?

Navalny: I believe the image was correct but that the reality has changed. And something in Putin's head has changed. Putin knows everything about me. I live under total surveillance. He knows that I am neither an oligarch nor a secret agent, that I'm a politician. But there have been changes: The protests against Lukashenko in Belarus, the protests in the Khabarovsk region against the Kremlin party. And the fact that our regional offices still exist ...

DER SPIEGEL: ... the local offices of your organization, with which you run a de facto national party, even though it officially isn't allowed to be one.

Navalny: For two years, we have been subjected to unprecedented pressure: Several searches a week, the confiscation of office equipment, the freezing of accounts and attempts to force people out of Russia. But our organization still exists. We have 40 regional offices. I am speculating here, but perhaps they decided: We've done all we can, but if these methods don't work, then it's time to resort to extreme means.



Navalny and his wife Yulia in 2013 after a court in Kirov overturned his conviction for fraud. Foto: Dzhavakhadze Zurab / Itar-Tass / action press

DER SPIEGEL: And what if it wasn't Putin?

Navalny: If it wasn't him, things would be a lot worse. One cup of Novichok would be enough to poison all passengers in a large Berlin subway station. If access to the agent isn't restricted to three people, but actually 30, then it's a global threat. That would be terrible.

DER SPIEGEL: Is Putin really that interested in you? He's very preoccupied with his foreign policy ambitions.

Navalny: It is often claimed that his sole focus anymore is geopolitics, that he doesn't care about anything else. But that's not true. He saw what happened in Khabarovsk, where people have been taking to the streets in protest for 80 days now and the Kremlin still has no idea what to do with them. The Kremlin realized they had to take extreme measures to prevent a "Belarusian scenario." The system is fighting for survival and we have felt the consequences.

DER SPIEGEL: You were poisoned during a trip to Siberia for the regional elections or, more precisely, to prepare for your "smart voting" strategy, the aim of which is to throw the Kremlin party United Russia out of local parliaments across the country by helping protest voters find the most promising opponent by way of an app. This strategy has had mixed success. "Smart voting" worked well in Tomsk, less so in Novosibirsk.

Navalny: The elections showed how political reality had changed. A candidate for election in a major Russian city is listed on the ballot as "Coordinator of the Navalny Staff" and

he gets 50 percent of the vote against Tomsk's most important oligarch. In Novosibirsk, our candidate got 45 percent. Tomsk was a victory and Novosibirsk was a success, even if some mandates were stolen from us.



Alexei Navalny's brother Oleg was released from a Russian prison in 2018 after three and half years of incarceration. Foto: Dmitry Serebryakov / AP

DER SPIEGEL: What is your next step?

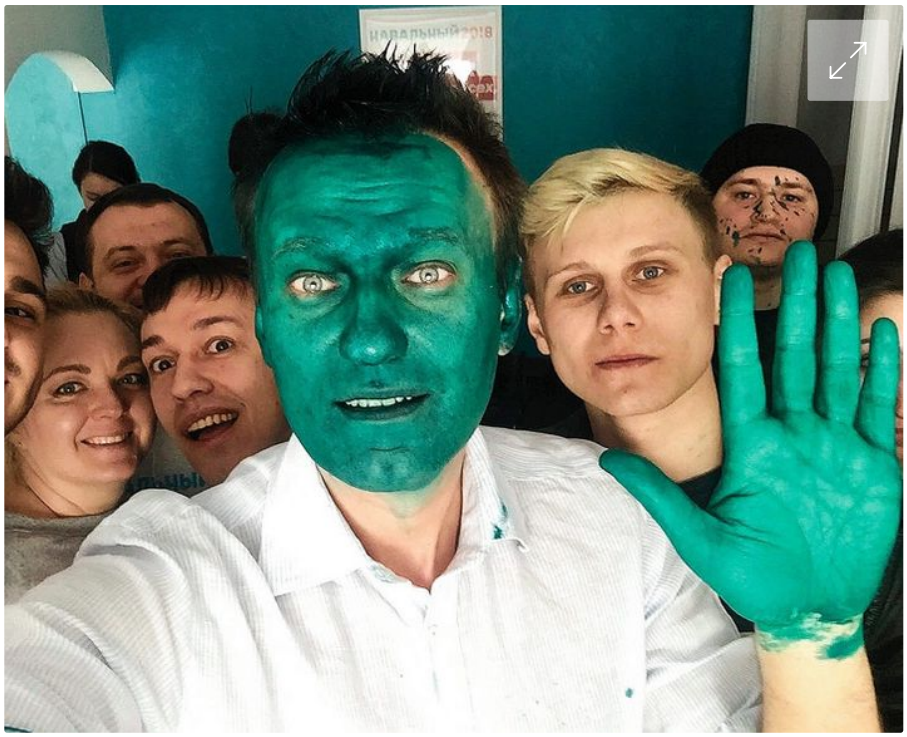
Navalny: The most important is preparations for Duma elections in 2021. "Smart voting" isn't an easy strategy. It involves supporting unpleasant candidates as well - communists, for example. This has consumed the greatest share of my work for two years: explaining to people why we also support people like that. It worked well in Moscow years ago. We elected communists, and now Putin's mayor, Sergey Sobyanin, is afraid to appear before the city parliament. United Russia lost its majority in Tomsk.

DER SPIEGEL: It is a strategy of pure opposition. What is your own actual agenda?

Navalny: Of course we are working in opposition to something. We have to destroy the power monopoly enjoyed by United Russia. We do that by tactically organizing votes in a political environment that usually doesn't even permit truly independent candidates.

DER SPIEGEL: Is United Russia important? The party is really just an appendage of Putin's system.

Navalny: There is a basic infrastructure with which Putin controls the country. It includes several key elements: In the past, it was his personal popularity, then TV propaganda, the controlled courts - and then United Russia. Targeting the party is important. Destroying its monopoly is the prerequisite for us to have any opportunity to formulate a positive agenda. The Kremlin's frustration stems from the fact that we have found effective methods in the struggle, even though we ourselves have been thrown out of the system.



Navalny opened regional offices across Russia in 2017 for the presidential election campaign, in which he was ultimately not allowed to participate. Opponents sprayed him with bright green paint in an attack in Barnaul that year. Foto: Alexei Navalny / AP

DER SPIEGEL: Where do you stand politically yourself? To the right? To the left?

Navalny: The political spectrum has never been as clear in Russia as it is in the West. Right, left, this division doesn't work in Russia. Take the Russian communists: Are they a leftist party? The reality is that they pursue a more right-wing, conservative course. Our leftists in Russia go to church and cross themselves. The template of German or American politics doesn't fit.

DER SPIEGEL: Where, then, do the political dividing lines run in Russia?